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Book review of Jones, Potrac, Cushion and Ronglan (2011) *The Sociology of Sports Coaching*: Routledge.

Citation for published version:

Kelly, J 2013, 'Book review of Jones, Potrac, Cushion and Ronglan (2011) *The Sociology of Sports Coaching*: Routledge.', *Sports Coaching Review*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 77-83.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Sports Coaching Review

Publisher Rights Statement:

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Book review (by John Kelly)

Jones, R. L., Potrac, P., Cushion, C. and Ronglan, L.T. (eds.) (2011) *The Sociology of Sports Coaching*. Routledge: London.

The first thing to note about *The Sociology of Sports Coaching* is the book title. As the editors accurately assert, sports coaching has, for too long, escaped the sociological gaze, missing out on the insights offered by sociological imagining. "Why does sports coaching need sociology?" ask the editors, before helpfully laying the groundwork for an answer, stating the book aims to demystify the mythical 'art' of sports coaching. It seeks to address the theory-practice gap in coaching; to provide a bridge between theoretically centred academics detached from practice and practice centred coaches devoid of theoretical application. This is not merely a theoretical exercise however, as the editors emphasise they are seeking to "take theory off the table and into the field" (p.8), to reveal the practical applications theoretical insights have in the coaching environment. This is quite a challenge they have set and, on the basis of this book, they have begun to help answer their own question of why sports coaching needs sociology.

The book is divided into three complimentary parts. The first single-chaptered section introduces the central topic, the sociology of coaching, with specific consideration given to viewing sociology "as an appropriate theoretical location from which to view sports coaching" (p.4). The editors impress upon the reader that despite sociological analyses increasingly being acknowledged in sports coaching as legitimate, applying them in practice remains limited. It observes that most coaching situations rely on skills and competencies that many coaches traditionally view as common-sense. These common-sense 'social competencies' (Lemert, 1997) are shown to be far from 'common' in the sense of psychologically innate. Rather, the editors inform us, they are intimately connected to wider social, cultural and

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political factors, making them sociological rather than psychological. The sociological imagination – the ability to link the micro (face to face interaction) to the macro (structural society) – is therefore encouraged and is resultantly a key theme running through the whole collection.

The book's second section is made up of nine chapters, each focusing on an individual social theorist. The third section – written by the editors – brings the theoretical discussions to life by relating them more specifically to sports coaching examples, drawing on the central topics of power, social integration and coach/athlete learning.

The second section's chapters all begin with a short biography of the selected theorist followed by an outline of the theory associated with her/him and its practical application to coaching, ending with a coach's practical assessment of the theory's utility in the field. A real strength of each chapter is the coaches' practical application of the theory at the end of each chapter. As a sociologically driven collection, it is a strength that within each chapter the concept of power remains constant and, while on first sight the selected theorists (and chapter topics) may appear unconnected, there is some degree of chapter progression. The first five theorist chapters deal with micro-macro sociologies ranging from the face-to-face interaction and impression management work of Goffman, Foucault's work on power and discourse, Bourdieu's insights into the structure and agency effects on social life, or what he called 'practice' (Bourdieu, 1984: 101), Hirschfeld's work on emotions, and Giddens' structuration theory. This provides a nice theoretical journey considering the individual and power before finishing with emotion and the balance between structure and agency. Readers will be struck by some of the helpful overlapping elements in some chapters (for example, Goffman and Hirschfeld; Bourdieu and Giddens) and may be keen to learn more of the overlapping and sometimes contradictory nature of theory. The final part of the section turns to

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communication systems (Luhmann), and communities of practice (Wenger) whereby actors negotiate and learn to be members of the communities in which they practice. The section ends with a chapter discussing exchange and dependency (Blau) and moral consciousness based on strategic or communicative action (Habermas). At this point there is a real sense of theoretical continuation, allowing readers to make connections between individual agency, societal structures and the specific contexts of each situation in ways that invite more critically interpretative coach/athlete centred self reflection in ways that traditional coaching structures and relationships resist.

The final section reinforces and brings together some of the preceding theoretical points in more practical ways and again provides a coherent structure beginning with an overview chapter discussing power before turning to social interaction, coach/athlete learning and concluding with a summary chapter. In the first chapter in this section we learn how power may be exerted, experienced and negotiated by coaches and athletes in the context of each interaction. This chapter draws heavily on Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus and Goffman's work on status roles. The social interaction chapter raises some interesting questions facing coaches and educators more broadly – namely to what extent should the coach be viewed as an orchestrator or leader? As Ronglan notes, "Orchestration implies steering, as opposed to controlling, a complex interactive process" (p.159). Teachers and lecturers may also be influenced here to ask to what extent should they be steering facilitators or controlling teachers. This is just one example where non-coach educators/students can benefit from reading the book. There then follows a chapter on coach/athlete learning that questions traditional coach development being restricted to 'training and development' to 'acquire' skills and behaviours. This is also where much of the theory and practice is drawn together illustrating the utility of sociological analyses in sports coaching and exposing the gap in the current literature. Here it is noted that there is a danger of uncritical coaches accepting and

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internalising much of the current 'factory' coach education through "structures of privilege" (p.174), custom and practice leading to the aforementioned and spurious "common-sense". Yet we learn even when coaches have some awareness of current coaching practice limitations, the power structures and relationships involved often result in coach educators becoming tick box enthusiasts, publicly accepting current practice to impress coach educators and assessors, thus reinforcing (publicly at least) dominant ideological interpretations of knowledge and practice while not learning at all about real life coaching. This is a very powerful section of the book that captures much of the book's significance; how to be a critical thinker and actor even in the most uncritical and structured situations. The book ends by admitting it is not a 'how to' manual in the traditional sense of coaching manuals. This is its strength, yet potentially and paradoxically its greatest challenge; engaging coaches and practitioners – who are often institutionalised into conceiving learning as a set of 'how to' manuals - with a practical text on coaching that is theoretically driven and interpretivistic.

There is no doubt that this book is a valuable resource for coaches, athletes and educators alike. It is extremely well written and offers excellent sociological insights into the practice of coaching. Coaches, athletes and educators/students alike will benefit from careful reading of its contents and the editors and contributors are to be congratulated. However, some limitations are present and they relate mainly to structure and theoretical depth. It is not clear why each theoretical chapter focused on a theorist rather than a theoretical approach more broadly. There is a danger that the richness of a theoretical tradition might be reduced to one person's work or that the similarities and overlaps in some theorists' work might be viewed as theoretically distinct. For example, the Goffman and Hochschild chapters offer excellent insights into the broader theoretical tradition of symbolic interactionism inviting insightful comparisons and contrasts between Goffman and Hochschild, not least Hochschild's stated dissatisfaction with Goffman's treatment of emotion. There

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might also be a danger of losing some of the target audience by beginning each chapter with biographies of the theorist and then an outline of the theory before providing practical coaching scenarios. Theorist biographies are not as important (or interesting to readers I suspect) as the theory and its application to coaching and might be better placed later in each chapter. Additionally, it is quite advanced theoretically in places making it likely to be difficult for those new to sociology. Whilst some theories are inherently practical (Goffman's symbolic interaction for example) and likely to elicit instant coach understanding, others are rather abstract and may require existing sociological knowledge and/or wider engagement in sociological theory. Whilst the book is not marketed as an introductory text, the self-identified fact that sociological application in coaching environments remains under-developed suggests many coaches and athletes are unlikely to be over-familiar with the theorists and their accompanying theories as some chapters occasionally require. Non-sociologists are likely to be challenged by some of the abstract theoretical passages but it is to the contributors' credit they have tried to explain and practically illustrate. Given the lack of sociological coaching texts, an introductory text (with broad theoretical overviews) would be a great partner for this book.

Despite these challenges, this is undoubtedly a very useful collection for coaches (and sports scientists) and sociologists (of coaching/sport), helping to reveal the value of sociology in coaching and coaching's utility in advancing sociological theory. It is most certainly a welcome and overdue addition to the body of work in the coaching literature and is also likely to offer sociological insights for non-coaches working in the field of sociology.